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NOTES ON THE ETHNOLOGY OF THE CONGO.

BY WALTER HOUGH.

THE Congo ranks among the mightiest rivers of the earth. Above the limit of the tide it floods over cataracts and miles of rapids bristling with rocks in its descent from the high African uplands. Indeed, it was a revelation to indomitable Stanley, to find, after these obstacles were passed, navigable water flowing from the far interior.

Along its stretches of turbulent or placid water dwell many tribes of negroes. Cannibals and fierce savages are numerous, and, altogether, it is a dark and dangerous country drained by this river, from where its waters begin, on the common watershed between it and the Nile, to its mouth on the west coast. The great wealth of ivory, dye-wood, rubber, palm-oil, and other products makes it profitable to establish many stations for traffic. The "Congo Free State," governed by Leopold, of Belgium, embraces a large territory gradually being explored and opened up to commerce.

Up to one year or so ago the National Museum possessed very few ethnological specimens from Africa, at which time Mr. W. P. Tisdell, agent of the United States to the Free States, brought home the first collection from that unknown region. Recently Lieutenant E. H. Taunt, U.S.N., visited the Upper Congo, and sent to the museum a large collection of barbaric weapons, ornaments, and various other objects made by the Congo tribes. These collections, with the one lately acquired from the Bureau of Arts in Paris, enable us to speak with some

degree of confidence about the customs and arts of these Africans. The collections are, as one would reason, rich in weapons and poor in clothing, coming from the region of perpetual feud and almost utter nakedness. It is interesting to remark that nearly all the African tribes know the art of smelting iron, and make a fine quality of metal by the rudest sort of apparatus; in fact, they are in the Iron Age. It is unknown how these savages of low grade became acquainted with the iron-smelting process,—an art which indicates a great step in civilization. Though a matter of conjecture, it is highly probable that from that ancient and mysterious mother of arts and sciences, Egypt, came this knowledge of the use and manufacture of iron throughout the entire “Dark Continent.”

Africa is very rich in iron. Travellers have noted great beds of highly-oxidized ore of a kind particularly fitted for these simple operations. The usual method of smelting iron is to pile layers of ore and charred wood in a small mud furnace. A continuous current of air is blown in by two bellows working alternately, or, among the Bongo, there are simply four or five draught-holes at the bottom of the furnace. When the ore has been smelted the furnace is allowed to cool, and the cake of ashes is washed, the lumps of iron collected, reheated, and pounded into a coherent mass with a stone hammer on a stone anvil. The iron thus made is very tenacious and remarkably rust-proof. It is preferred by the natives to steel or foreign iron, because if an assagai-head is bent into an interrogation-point the warrior calmly beats it into shape with a stone. The iron also holds a good edge; in fact, a sharp assagai-head is the razor of the uncivilized barber. The weapons, which are hammered out with a stone, are, despite the fact, finely finished, and are as creditable specimens of smith-work as can be found. The common idea that conventionality and repetition in art argues a low degree of civilization is met by the fact that the aboriginal workman cannot make two things alike. He does not work by pattern; he follows, for instance, the shape of his iron or the suggestion of a chance blow. This is the reason of the so-called “originality” of all peoples not practising division of labor or using machines. Among the forty-five specimens of assagais every one is different, although they can be separated into several groups by general likenesses.

Travellers say that there is rivalry among smiths to produce different and bizarre forms, and, as a result of this, many weapons are made which are of no use, being merely *chef d'œuvres* of the blacksmith. The typical assagai and javelin has a leaf-shaped blade, which is double curved; that is, a horizontal section of the blade would show a curve like a thin S, or like Hogarth's line of beauty. This feature has no special use, as the assagai does not whirl in its flight. At the base of the blade is a socket into which sets the long, slender shaft, usually wound with brass, copper, or iron tape. At the bottom is an iron spud, though not found on those for hurling. It is said that in the act of throwing the weapon the negro gives it a vibratory motion, so that it passes through the air with a whistling sound. Arrows are made with uncomfortable-looking barbed points. Knives are merely assagai-heads fitted into handles. The shields are among the finest specimens of basket-work in the world. They are models of lightness and strength besides. Professor Mason describes the mode of construction, and compares it with the similar work done by the Clallam Indians and the Japanese. He calls it the "fish-trap" style of basketry, and states that "the oblong oval shields of bamboo made by the Bateke negroes of the Lower Congo imitate this structure exactly. The frame of the shield is an oblong hoop on which are stretched splints of rattan running longitudinally on one side and transversely on the other, crossing at right angles except at the plano-convex space at the ends."¹

Just mentioning the short swords and bill-knives, some of them highly decorated with nut-shell fringe and leopard-skin, we note the executioner's sword. Its blade is short, broad, and heavy, and it is sharp on both sides. It is really in bad taste to describe an execution, but life there is so cheap and the Congo-African way of relieving a man of his head so unique that it will bear description. In order to give an *éclat* suitable to African taste, and to render the feat of decapitating with the weapon possible, the victim is secured to a seat and a strong sapling bent down and fastened by means of cords and a collar around his neck; then, while his neck is taut the high executioner delivers the blow, and the severed head is thrown into the air like a bomb.

¹ Aboriginal Basket-Work, Smithsonian Rept., 1884, ii. p. 298.

The Nyam-Nyam and several Congo tribes have a very peculiar knife-boomerang. It is a weapon sharp on all edges of its blades,—it might be called a collection of knife-blades. It is kept concealed in the shield, and is thrown with a whirling motion, and its wide path and the accuracy and force with which it is thrown make it a dangerous weapon.

At the Stanley Falls Station, now held by the Arabs, a strange kind of money is current, called, from its shape, "spade money," being pieces of iron used as a medium of exchange. The relative rank of money in Africa makes iron equal to copper, and copper to silver. Cloth is a very common barter medium, and its use is mostly not for dress, but the custom is to wrap the dead in many folds of cotton goods. Cotton grows abundantly, and a coarse, narrow cloth is made.

A stuff exactly similar to Mocha coffee-sacking is woven, and highly valued. It is grass-cloth, as it is commonly called; but sometimes it is made of the tough outer bark of some kind of shrub, and it is woven by men. The staple food of the Congo region is manioc, or cassava roots, which are pounded in mortars with large pestles of ivory. Peanuts are also cultivated. Several spoons in the Taunt collection are said to have been used in the cannibal feasts of the Arrhuimi River tribes. Pipes are made of horns, and the bowl is placed on one side. The horn is filled with water, and the smoke is inhaled by suction at the open end. Travellers speak of the extremely intoxicating effect of the tobacco and hemp mixture, which is brought out more powerfully by being drawn through water.

The customs and beliefs of these Africans with regard to the spirit-world are very crude. A belief in evil spirits, witches, good and bad luck comprises nearly all of the religious elements of the negro-life. The "doctor" is the interpreter of religion, and the fetish is a safeguard against all harm. There are many Mohammedans, who practise a debased form of that worship. It seems that no form of religion can withstand the brutalizing effect of the African nature and the childishness of his temperament.

What will be the future of this section of Africa, its relation to the world of commerce, and the extent to which it will be affected by modern civilization are difficult problems. While it is capable of supporting a large population, the climate is malarious and utterly unfit for Europeans. The African seems to have

gained an immunity or idiosyncrasy to miasmatic influences by generations of adaptation. He has made little progress in civilization. This is due to the lack of inherent capability of the negro type more than any other cause. The lack of harbors on the coasts of Africa has always and will in the future militate against the settlement and growth by advanced races. It looks now as if this continent, vast in wealth and area, is becoming overrun by the fierce disciples of Islam, the most undesirable settlers possible, and in whose hands it will be lost in an irreclaimable darkness. Another great bane to the Congo and all Africa is the accursed slave-trade. For over three thousand years she has bartered her children to be slaves over the whole earth. Livingstone, Schweinfurth, Stanley, and many other distinguished explorers have seen, with anguish, this comprehensive atrocity in all its phases, and have tried to perfect plans for putting it down. The Congo Free State, through Henry Stanley, has done much to suppress this evil. That recent brilliant master-stroke of enlisting Tippu Tib, the prince of slave-traders, against the slave-trade cannot receive too much praise, and it is to be hoped that, as another laurel in Stanley's crown, he may successfully rescue Emin Bey, the soldier-scientist, from his perilous position in the heart of Africa, and restore him, with his large collections, to the civilized world.

NOTES ON CLASSIFICATION AND NOMENCLATURE FOR THE AMERICAN COMMITTEE OF THE INTERNATIONAL GEOLOGICAL CONGRESS, MARCH, 1887.

BY N. H. WINCHELL.

THE PALÆOZOIC.—In the light of recent work done in the classic region of American geology, Eastern New York, by Messrs. Ford and Walcott, reviving some of the old questions that separated the geologists of forty years ago into widely variant schools, it becomes appropriate for this committee to earnestly and justly weigh the facts so far as they bear on the choice of names for recommendation to the next congress.

It will have to be admitted that the scheme of stratigraphy